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AyA To Build Sewage Treatment Plant in Jacó

By Leland Baxter-Neal

\$4 Million Loan to Include Sewer System, Treatment Plant

Costa Rica's national water authority announced this week it will build a much-needed sewer system and wastewater treatment plant for the central Pacific town of Jacó.

Ricardo Sancho, president of the Instituto Costarricense de Acueductos y Alcantarillados (Costa Rican Institute of Aqueducts and Sewers, or AyA), said in an email late this week the project will cost an estimated \$4 million and include both the treatment plant and a sewer system.

"The project will be included in a loan from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI), currently being executed," he said.

In addition, a new potable water treatment plant for Jacó is under construction, and local developers are establishing a trust fund to privately invest another \$3 million in expanding the potable water system's capacity and distribution.

A 30-year-old Uruguayan engineering firm, SEINCO, has been awarded the \$172,000 contract to conduct the feasibility studies and to design both the sewer system and the wastewater treatment plant for Jacó, AyA said. The firm has eight months to finish.

The announcement comes in the wake of wastewater woes in major tourist areas in the province of Guanacaste. In Tamarindo, one of the most popular beach towns in the province, hotel reservations were cancelled and the community expressed outrage after water tests last year found extremely elevated levels of fecal mater in 13 streams feeding the internationally famous beach.

Then, just two weeks ago, the 308-room Occidental Allegro Papagayo Hotel, located further north, on the special government tourism-concession plot known as the Polo Turístico, was shut down for trucking its waste to illegal dump sites.

AyA's announcement of a plant and sewer system for Jacó came as a surprise to the municipality of Garabito, which is seated in Jacó and has been fighting — unsuccessfully, local leaders believed — for close to a year to get just such a project started.

Mayor Marvin Elizondo and Municipal Council President Damaris Arriola both said they found out about the project through a small article published earlier this week in the daily newspaper La Nación.

"Hopefully this is going to happen now," Mr Elizondo said. "But the cost doesn't seem to be in line with our needs."

Doubts were raised during a Municipal Council meeting Wednesday as to whether \$4 million could pay for a sewer system and treatment plant extensive enough to handle Jacó's booming population and development.

José Miguel Villalobos, former Justice Minister and pro-bono legal advisor to the municipality, noted that AyA is investing \$60 million in a sewer system for Puntarenas, the port city north of Jacó, 15 times what is to be spent in Jacó.

Estimates put Puntarenas' current population at around 112,000 people. During the tourism high season, the population — including visitors — of Jacó and surrounding areas can swell to as many as 60,000 people, according to municipal estimates.

"Either this is an error, or a joke," Mr Villalobos said.

As a comparison, Guillermo Chin of Consultores Urbanos, who is doing initial surveys for a possible wastewater treatment plant and sewer system in the Quepos-Manuel Antonio area, said just for the small town of Quepos, which isn't expected to reach 12,000 people until 2025, the investment is estimated at \$2.5 million.

That project, which would also include the tourism development around Manuel Antonio, which hasn't been surveyed yet, is to be funded — investors hope — by a private trust fund and built through a Private-Public Partnership (PPP). Once built, AyA would take over administering the system.

The Quepos-Manuel Antonio area recently saw its potable water system expanded through a PPP, the first of its kind completed in Costa Rica, while similar PPP projects are underway in Playas del Coco and Playa Hermosa, in northern Guanacaste. The \$3 million expansion of Jacó's water system the AyA announced this week would also be a PPP.

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PLAN OF ACTION: Local leaders were cautiously optimistic this week about plans for a sewer system and wastewater treatment plant for Jacó. AyA says it will fund the \$4 million project with a loan from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration.

Mr Sancho was unavailable to answer further questions late this week, however, AyA spokeswoman, Gretel Corrales, insisted the investment would be sufficient for the needs of Jacó.

"The AyA is not going to build something so big without having first studied the horizons of future growth," she said.

The Beach Times attempted to contact SEINCO in Uruguay, but the engineers involved with the project were out of the country. AyA did not have a number for the company in Costa Rica, Ms Corrales said.

The AyA was given authority over local water by the municipality in 2006. In Costa Rica, local government has the possibility of overseeing the local potable and wastewater systems, but can forfeit them to the AyA. Mr Elizondo, who assumed his office about 12 months ago, has called the move a mistake and complained that AyA was not prioritizing Jacó's wastewater needs.

This week he said he was encouraged by the news, despite his doubts about the total investment.

Currently, businesses and homes in Jacó are responsible for disposing of their own waste, either through septic tanks and leach fields or through private sewage treatment plants. Concerns have been raised that some businesses and homes, however, are dumping waste into streets or rivers, untreated.

Last year, Mr Elizondo ordered all businesses larger than 1200 square meters (12,916 square feet) to obey a long-standing, little enforced health regulation ordering them to have their own wastewater treatment plant. The mayor gave until November 30 of last year to obey, and this week assigned his "two most trusted" municipal inspectors to begin visiting every hotel in Jacó.

"If they haven't obeyed, they will have to close. They were warned and have had their time, now the time is up," Mr Elizondo said, saying that he expected that some businesses will be shut down beginning next week.